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ABSTRACT

Positive school-media relations are essential if schools are to expect an "understanding press" during crucial periods. Recommendations for developing and maintaining such relations fall into 10 areas, including school boards' establishing a firm media relations policy, appointing a board spokesman, creating a "game plan" for media dealings, and knowing reporters' responsibilities, attitudes, and handicaps. Additionally, 10 working tips are provided; these range from offering ideas to the press, but being careful to give editors free rein in choosing what to cover, to becoming aware of the media's inner workings. Such lessons should move schools closer to one central goal--contributing to a better-informed society. (KS)

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"Don't Fight the Man Who Buys His Ink by the Barrel"

A Presentation For
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National School Board Association

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(Dealing Effectively with the News Media)

"Don't Fight The Man Who Buys His Ink By The Barrel"

In an era of intense public scrutiny of all American institutions, including public education, "media relations" must rank among the more important topics which should be addressed by school board members and administrators.

I have chosen the motto: "Don't Fight The Man Who Buys His Ink By The Barrel," as a point of departure from my remarks today, because I believe this adage focuses on some of the real issues we must face in treating our topic, "Dealing Effectively With The News Media."

Quite graphically, this motto should remind us that inasmuch as we represent the greatest social force impacting on the lives of students and parents, we must also assume responsibility for working positively with that great molder of public opinion, The American Press.

We are the people who are in the "eye of the tornado" as far as education is concerned because of our decision-making role. Most of us have a tendency to speak of the media in terms such as "good press," "bad press" and "understanding press" as referenced to our own local or state situations. To me, "a good press" is essential to every effective school-community relations program, and a "bad press" that consistently hammers away at the school program can eventually cause serious damage to education.

In times of school crisis, an "understanding press" is essential, but we cannot expect them to react positively to our schools at those times unless we have developed an ongoing, good working relationship with media representatives, particularly the working reporter and the decision-making editor. Such a relationship is the best guarantee of sensitive, fair and accurate handling of news during the inevitable crisis situation and will result in the "best press" for our schools.

I submit for your consideration, my perception that most "bad" news stories about education really have nothing to do with media relations--rather, an adverse press usually proceeds from four basic problems:

1. Administrators and Boards who do not follow their own established policies.
2. Consistent violations of freedom of information and open meeting laws.
3. Boards who are split philosophically on school issues.
4. A lack of understanding regarding the mission of the press in our society.

Therefore, the first step in building an effective media relations program which will stand the test of time is for board members, administrators and others in each school system to get their house in order. I would like to share ten specific areas[1] which should assist every board of education in building a good relationship with the press that will keep them from drowning in that "sea of ink" that is at every editors disposal.

I. Establish A Media Relations Policy

Every board should have a policy on media relations. This policy should stress "openness" both to the media and to the general public. It should spell out who may speak officially for the board, the district and each local school--and under what circumstances. The policy should include rules governing reports in the schools and access to public records. Finally, the policy should detail media relations during board meetings.

II. Appoint A Chief Spokesman For The Board

A good reporter can "whipsaw" a story out of thin air, simply by talking to one board member and then another until some inconsistency is revealed. On important stories and board decisions, it is imperative that the chief spokesman do the talking. Individual board members and administrators will want to provide input and/or viewpoints in some instances, but the official board position should be discussed by the chief spokesman only.

III. Indoctrinate All Board Members and Key Administrators

The Board must have a "game plan" when dealing with the media. Nothing makes an easier story than the board which takes a unanimous vote, following which each member provides a different interpretation to the reporter. The board and administration must also be on the same wavelength. There is a place for personal opinion even in the most controversial of stories, but each board member and administrator must understand the net impact of his or her comments and guide them accordingly.

IV. Get To Know Your Reporters

Good reporters resent favoritism in any form. But, like anybody

else, they appreciate being understood as to the requirements which are placed upon them by their editors. Learn how the reporter operates. Does he or she have an early deadline? What editorial freedom is allowed? Are his or her stories always rewritten beyond recognition by an editor? Who is responsible for headlines? Does the reporter feel fairly treated? Getting to know your reporter is an exercise in human relations that pays dividends. When you have learned the reporters strengths and weaknesses, you will better know how far to extend your trust. Above all, never go off-the-record, until you know the reporter very well indeed! Some reporters never allow off-the-record comments. Your every remark is fair game to them. Others prefer off-the-record comments to build "background" for the story. Tread very lightly until you know for sure.

V. Take The Initiative

The reporter who must dig to uncover a story is more likely to cast the story in an unfavorable light. The "story within the story" will center on the problems the reporter had uncovering his collection of facts. Get in the habit of calling your reporter before he calls you. You'll be surprised how many more stories will be treated with sensitivity. If the reporter gets the jump on the story and calls you first, <u>always</u> be sure to return the call. Otherwise you may read "school officials refused to speak to reporters when questioned about . . ."

VI. Never Cover-Up!

Remember the lessons of Watergate and ABSCAM. To any reporter worth his salt, a cover-up is a bigger story than the initial event. A cover-up of any kind is always front page news. Cover-ups <u>never</u> <u>work</u>!

VII. Never, Never Lie!

A partial truth told to a reporter is viewed the same as a lie. Reporters are astonishing in their ability to sniff out lies and half truths. When they uncover one, they will track down the real truth no matter what. Jaded though most reporters try to appear, most are closet-idealists. They have a dedication to truth that would startle Diogenes out of his toga.

VIII. Provide Adequate Documentation

Reporters like to back up their facts with more facts. Since they are "word people," reporters appreciate reports and documents which they can study. Always provide reporters with a copy of any reports or documents pertaining to the school system, so long as you can do so without jeopardizing anyone's legitimate right to privacy.

IX. Learn and Use Proper English

If the English language was good enough for Jefferson and Lincoln, it ought to be good enough for us. As citizen spokesmen for public education, board members have the obligation to speak plain English and to demand the same from their administrators. Why do we feel called upon to call a chapter in an arithmetic text a "mathematics learning module?" Why do we, as administrators, instead of simply talking with parents, want to "implement conferencing procedures?" Reporters know why. And so should we.

X. Avoid Unnecessary Executive Sessions

Even if we did not live in an era of "Sunshine Laws," there should never be secret meetings of any board. To attempt anything of this

nature is suicidal and should be avoided like the plague! When you must go into executive session (personnel matters, for instance, in most states) give a clear explanation of why you must do so. Simply to move behind closed doors with a statement such as "for discussion of privileged information," is not good enough for most reporters. They want to know what kind of personnel information. Evaluation, Discipline, Termination, Negotiations? Tell them and observe your state law.

In addition to adopting and obeying these basic rules, I would like to share a few working tips what will enhance your relationship with the media:

1. Feed story ideas to the press, but be careful to let the editors decide what to cover.
2. Don't ask for story approval, unless it is to help correct technical information.
3. Tell a reporter when a story on education is good. Put it in writing with a copy to his editor.
4. Know media deadlines and release stories so all or most media will get them at the same time.
5. Don't lecture reporters on "what is good or bad" for education. They have an assignment to fulfill. They are not your public relations agent.
6. Don't provoke reporters with a terse "no comment." Help them to write a potentially adverse story by giving all the pertinent facts.
7. Invite reporters and editors to your schools for lunch and periodic conferences, without trying to "sell a story."

8. Respond promptly to reporters requests for information.
9. If reporters can't do a story, offer to prepare the copy for their review. Be sure copy and pictures are of professional quality.
10. Become knowledgeable about the inner workings of the media.

In summary, we, as American educational leaders, can achieve a harmonious balance between the legitimate demands of the news media on the one hand and our perceived vested interests in school public relations on the other. But in order to do this, we must spend the time and energy necessary to learn about each others goals, needs and obligations.

We can deal effectively with the news media and reap great returns in a host of positive news stories about schools as well. We must, however, accept responsibility for telling the public about our "warts" in addition to our good points. If we want to be credible in the eyes of society, we must be willing to have both sides of every story told. Let's stop fighting the "man who buys his ink by the barrel" and work with him to present a balanced and accurate account of every issue.

Learning and practicing these lessons of media relations will move us closer to one of our central goals, contributing to a better informed society.

Dr. Jay Stein of Western Illinois University speaks to this in his recent book: Mass Media, Education and a Better Society; "Formal education needs the mass media if it is to survive; the mass media needs educational leadership if they are to progress." The problem is one of

bridging the gap between them. The mass media offers the possibility of open-ended wisdom for everyone. Given the prospects of greater cooperation between these two principal channels, we are certain to help more people find "the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and the knowledge we have lost in information," which the poetry of T. S. Eliot so beautifully praises.[2]

May we also, strive toward this ideal! Thank you.

NOTES

1. Mansfield, Steve, "Media Relations: What The Board Can Do," Presentation for NSBA Convention Clinic, April 1979, (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education).

2. Stein, Jay W., Mass Media, Education and a Better Society, Chicago, Nelson-Hall Inc., 1979, p. 148.